A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

Chapter Seven

As it turned out, Republic Navy fighters could sell for a lot of money in Wild Space, if one knew the right people. Esera learned this the hard way, when she discovered just how badly she'd been cheated by the scrapper she'd sold her ARC-170 to. But lust for material wealth was not something Jedi felt. At least she had been able to afford passage on a freighter that stopped at Polis Massa, that was what mattered.

"Come on, R8." she said to the astromech droid, as they left the freighter. She'd considered selling it too, but who knew how quickly Republic agents might find it and use it to track her? No, that wouldn't do. They were herded down the terminal to customs, along with the meager handful of other passengers. Most were locals, it seemed, and went through in quick order... Then she saw the battle droids.

"Identification please." the droid said.

Esera swallowed nervously. "I wasn't aware it was required." she said.

"This is a standard security procedure in all Confederate sectors. Identification please." the droid repeated.

Right... thought Esera, feeling very foolish. *Of course they'd tighten security now that they've taken a side in the war.* "I don't have any identification with me." she told the droid. Her original plan had just fallen apart, it was time to improvise.

"I will have to alert customs. They will take you in for questioning." the droid told her. "Please step out of the line."

At least security wasn't as tight as it could be. Esera was ushered off to deal with an actual person, the Polis Massan in charge of customs at the spaceport. R8 followed, with her lightsaber hidden inside.

"It is not often we get outsiders visiting us. It has been a busy week." said the administrator, once she was escorted into his office. "Please leave us." he ordered to the battle droids. They did as told.

Now, isn't this weird... She'd never been so close to battle droids that weren't shooting at her. "I apologize about the trouble-" Esera began.

"Oh, you've caused us no trouble here. You're the first one who's been up here today." the administrator waved his hand. "You came from Terminus, so I suspect you'll say that you were unaware of the change in policy until you got here?"

"Yes, that is so." said Esera, nodding. Would it really be as simple as telling them she just didn't know about the rule change?

"That is strange, because we were sure to notify all our citizens through our embassy on Terminus." The administrator's face betrayed no expression, being devoid of anything but eyes, but Esera got the feeling he would have been smiling. "You are not a citizen of this sector, are you?"

"No..." Again, Esera swallowed nervously, feeling sweat beginning to form on her brow. She was awful at lying. They'd see right through her. *The truth it is, then.* "I'm from the Republic."

"I see."

"I'm a Jedi. My name is Esera Komara. I was knighted a few months ago."

That got the administrator's attention. He leaned in. "I see." he said, quieter. "Have you come to drive out the droids?"

"No..." Esera could see him wilt in disappointment. That just made this harder. "I'm... uh, I'm not actually with the Republic right now. Actually, I'm... I'm wanted for treason."

"I see." said the administrator, yet again. "A Jedi... traitor?"

"If treason is saving the lives of innocents, I guess that's what I am." Esera sat very still as she waited for a response. The Polis Massan also sat still, staring at her with calm, beady eyes. They must have been silent for half a minute, before the administrator spoke again.

"You wish to hide here, then?" he asked.

"Yes, that would be nice..." Esera said, with a faltering hopeful smile.

"I will take it to my superiors. For now, we will hold you here."

The Polis Massans were punctual. Esera and her droid had hardly been moved to a holding room when the administrator and another of his race returned. "This is Kruth. He's a courier." said the administrator.

"Nice to meet you." Esera answered, nodding. Kruth nodded back.

"He doesn't speak vocally, unlike me. Most of us don't, it's why we don't leave home often." the administrator explained. "But he's the only one of us who has been more than two sectors from here."

"Are you sending me to hide somewhere?" asked Esera.

"No, not exactly. Yesterday, we received a summons, apparently from Count Dooku, for a representative from the Subterrel sector to travel to Raxus and take part in a special session of the Separatist Congress. We are sending Kruth, and we want you to go with him."

Esera blinked once. "You *what?*"

"We are sending Kruth to Raxus, and we want you to go with him." the administrator repeated, tilting his head. "Are you feeling alright, Jedi Komara?"

"Uh..." Esera felt like she was about to collapse from all the blood leaving her face. "Well, I was hoping to just lay low for a while, stay out of the way of the war, maybe get in contact with the Order and tell them the truth of things... Going to Raxus... the very heart of the Confederacy, in case you didn't know, isn't what I'd consider laying low."

"We are not a people comfortable in the wider world, Jedi Komara. We would greatly appreciate your help and protection in these trying times." The administrator gave her an insistent glare. "That is what Jedi do, isn't it?"

"Alright, alright, fine!" sighed Esera. "I'll go to Raxus with your friend here. Just... don't expect me to come back if my cover is blown. Which it probably will be."

"Thank you for your help, Jedi Komara. With luck, no one will know you were ever here."

This... is disgusting, thought Tarkin, forcing a sneer from his face as he watched the corpulent alien waddle about. Orn Free Taa was a popular name among the pro-war senators, but he was an idiot. Worse than an idiot, he was a shortsighted idiot. And now here Tarkin was, forced to play nice with alien vermin.

"...which is why I think we have no choice but to continue the war." huffed and puffed Senator Taa, as he bumbled around his office looking for who knew what. Tarkin had stopped paying attention.

"Yes, yes, of course the war must go on. And we need someone able to prosecute that war to the fullest extent." said Tarkin.

"On that, we are all agreed." said Senator Burtoni, another alien, though spindly instead of rotund. At least her people were useful, growing clones for the war. "But who?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Tarkin asked, rolling his eyes.

"Me?" Taa questioned, a stupid, questioning look on his face.

"*Not* you." said Tarkin, in his most icy voice. "It should be me. I am a veteran, I was high in the ranks, I was close to the Chancellor before his murder. The people will have confidence in me."

"Well..." started Taa.

"What are your merits, Senator?" asked Tarkin. "Embezzlement, graft, bribery?"

Stating his crimes got Taa to fume. "Now you wait just a minute-"

"I will not wait just a minute. You are unelectable, everyone knows what you have been up to. If you want to serve the Republic, I think your best hope would be to work from the sides and not the top."

"I have been in this Senate for thirteen years, little man." growled Taa. "What do you know of its workings?"

"About as much as I know the workings of a sewer and its inhabitants." said Tarkin. Taa's glower darkened. "I am not a politician. I am a soldier. And what the Republic needs now is a soldier, not a politician."

"A soldier understands the needs of an army." Burtoni said.

"Precisely." Tarkin said, standing up. "Senator Taa, you have a great gift for corruption. Use it against the weak-willed pacifists, put me on the Chancellor's dais, and I will save this Republic, your Ryloth included. Work against me, and you may find yourself in an unpleasant spot. Thank you for your time."

He left the aliens to consider their options. If they had an inkling of wisdom, they'd know what was best for the Republic. That Bail Organa would only lead it to ruin; his love of peace would likely see them all bending over backwards to the Separatist traitors. No, that would not do at all.

Dooku's computer system had yielded information, but as was so predictable for Grievous, something had gone wrong. The man had been crafty enough to guard his secrets even in death, and A4D had triggered some kind of defensive program. Thankfully, he'd stopped the process before much damage could be done, but it left him with a pile of raw, unsorted data. "If it's unsorted, sort it." Grievous ordered.

"Master, that will take weeks!" whined the droid.

"Then you had better get started!" laughed Grievous, before he returned to his war maps.

In the meantime, *Invisible Hand* had reached Raxus at last. The Confederacy's capital was a far cry from the ultra-urban Coruscant. From orbit, Grievous could only see scattered lights on the dark side, and very few signs of civilization on the light side. Most of the planet was wilderness, it seemed. That was fine by him, he didn't like crowds. Tomorrow, he would address the civilian government. They would follow him, or... or else he didn't know what he'd do. Bombard the planet? Go rogue? Ignore them? He already had the military's loyalty, he didn't *really* need this civilian government. The only advantage they could give him was legitimacy in the eyes of those organic underlings who cared about such trivial matters.

For now, that could wait; Grievous had organized a conference between his most able officers. This was not a new affair, he'd done this every few weeks for the last year, it was the only way to manage such a diversity of naval assets. From across the galaxy, they arrived as holograms around a single large table. There was the famous-for-being-tricked-by-Skywalker Mar Tuuk, there was Hithlu the Umbaran refugee, there was the great escapist Rame Cartroll, his co-escapist Pors Tonith, there was the brilliant Givin navigator Alzar Khwaramenes, who alone here did not hold any rank of admiral, and the new faces, crab-man Kronaak and boy Eemon. There were empty spots, too, a testament to the growing attrition in the Confederate Navy. Most missed of all was Trench, his fellow top commanders had taken to carrying walking sticks in his memory. Grievous had no use for such sentiment, though. Trench had been exceedingly competent, but not a friend. Come to think of it, Grievous didn't have any friends at all, he didn't need any.

"I see some of you did not live through my victory at Coruscant." said Grievous, skipping introductions as usual.

"I see some of us are here for the first time." noted Admiral Mar Tuuk, the most senior officer among them, bar Greivous.

"The crab is Kronaak, the boy is Ricimer Eemon. Both have been promoted in recognition of their talents." Grievous folded his hands. "Now, what is the situation?"

"The Kashyyyk counter-offensive is going well, sir." Mar Tuuk reported. "It has relieved significant pressure from Boz Pity, though we're no closer to claiming those hyperspace maps than we were last time we met. However, morale is up for the first time in the last six months, I am confident I can deliver you victory should reinforcements be delivered in a timely manner."

There are no reinforcements left to spare, Grievous thought.

"The fighting continues at Mygeeto and Garqi. We are not in danger of losing, but neither are they." reported Vice Admiral Pors Tonith. "Ywllandar has fallen, though, and it won't be long until our position is in peril again. We need reinforcements."

None will be coming any time soon, Grievous thought.

"The Republic has moved on from Ryloth and is now attacking Tellanroaeg." said Vice Admiral Rame Cartroll. He sagged in his seat, his uniform was wrinkled, his eyes sunken, and he looked like he hadn't slept in a week. "To put it simply, the Second Fleet is finished as a fighting force. My recommendation is that it be combined with the First Fleet in the Sluis sector. But if you would have us fight to the end, we will."

Grievous waited for someone else to speak, but that was it. Admiral Piast was missing, Grievous realized. Hopefully he wasn't dead, he was the last commander of note near Serenno. And everyone else here had been with him at Coruscant, and were now lifting the siege of Triton. *The attrition*, he reminded himself. It was only going to get worse if things kept up like this. *Killing Palpatine was supposed to turn the tide in our favor... Coruscant was the decisive battle, we won! But the situation continues to deteriorate! Why would Sidious and Dooku have me give up the initiative and let the tide turn if their master plan wouldn't guarantee victory?* "There are fewer of you each month." he growled. "Stop dying."

"Easier said than done, General." Vice Admiral Hithlu said, grim as always. "The liberation of the Sluis sector is continuing as planned. Most of the Republic forces are regrouping at Eriadu, including those stationed in the Atravis sector. Interestingly enough, a small fleet left Shumavar, but did not go to Eriadu."

"Shumavar?" Grievous scoffed. "Who cares about Shumavar?" He hadn't even heard of it until just now.

"Merely an interesting observation, General." sighed Hithlu.

"It is of no matter. I am disappointed in the lack of progress being made. Dooku assured me that my attack would cripple the Republic's ability to make war. Either you are doing something wrong, or he was wrong, and I was not one to doubt the Count." said Grievous.

"The Count was wrong." said Commodore Alzar Khwaramenes. "As I said at Thyferra, sir, there was a ninety-six percent chance this raid would change nothing in the short term. The absence of Palpatine will only start to hurt in the long run."

"How long, skullface?" asked Grievous, slamming a fist on the table hard enough to make himself cough. "We are running out of ships, we are running out of droids, we are running out of territory, we are running out of *time!*"

"At least another two months, sir, by my calculations." said the Givin. "The had has been cut off, the body will thrash and flail, but it will rot. Eventually."

"It had better." Grievous turned to the two newcomers. "Crab, boy, you have done as I asked you to?"

"We have, General." said Kronaak. "I am not a learned creature, so I will leave this to Admiral Eemon."

"Thank you, Rear Admiral Kronaak." said Eemon. He smiled smugly, leaning forward. "For those not in the know, the General has decided to test our competence by thinking up a new strategy to win the war. Let us begin by asking: have you ever heard of total war?"

"I cannot say I have heard that used as a specific term before." Grievous admitted.

"My father invented it. He dedicated our nation, every factory and every machine, every field and every farm, every man, woman, and child, to making war. One hundred percent of the economy was given over to the war effort. He erased the distinction between civilian and soldier, they all furthered the war in their own way. Every single one." Eemon held up a finger to drive home his point. "He did not care for corporations, he did not care for profits, he did not care for luxuries or trade or anything of that sort. All that mattered was destroying the enemy. And he did."

"I can see the merit in this 'total war.'" said Grievous.

"It is our recommendation that we move the Confederacy's economy to a total war condition, so to speak." Kronaak stated. "We have drawn up a plan on how to achieve this."

"Speak." ordered Grievous.

"It's quite simple, really." Eemon clasped his hands together. "First, nationalize everything. Second, switch to a fiat currency that we can produce at whatever rate we need to, so that we are no longer reliant on third party loans. Third, mobilize the entire population in whatever ways we can to contribute to the war effort. Fourth, streamline production of war materials and produce them in as much volume as possible."

"Nationalization?" Mar Tuuk was incredulous. "That'll drive our corporate sponsors right over to the Republic for good!"

"Fiat currency is an idea for university professors." Pors Tonith shook his head. "And universities are the only places where ideas that don't work can survive. If we break with the Banking Clan, it'll be economic disaster."

"This would be a direct counter to our principles!" exclaimed Rame Cartroll. "We are fighting against all-powerful governments, not fighting to create another one!"

"The boy is right." Hithlu said, rolling his eyes at the others. "You either fight to win, or you don't fight at all."

It's true, Grievous thought. As wild as Eemon and Kronaak's ideas were, at least they had a plan. It was better than going along with something that obviously wasn't working. "I will take your words into consideration. Give me a full write-up by tomorrow."

"We... We already have one, sir." Kronaak said. "We just didn't think you'd actually ask for it."

"Reading has never been in your style, General." said Alzar Khwaramenes.

Grievous growled, and then coughed. "You have your orders."

"There is one more thing." Eemon said, his smile growing even smugger.

"What?" sighed Grievous.

"General, you are quite right that we are running out of time. Rear Admiral Kronaak and I know our plan would take time to implement. Fortunately, there is something that just might buy us the time we need, to relieve pressure from our industrial worlds now under siege."

"And what would that be?" he asked.

Kronaak clicked his claws, and added another projection to his own hologram. Grievous's eyes narrowed when he saw what it was. "What does my flagship from two years ago have to do with this?" he asked.

"This isn't *Malevolence*, sir." said the crab-man. "This is *Cataclysm*, her sister ship. After the Antar disaster, all work was suspended, but the ship had already been launched. She's a hulk in orbit of Mintooine right now, awaiting scrapping."

"Sister ship?" Grievous leaned in closer to the hologram display. *Cataclysm* was much the same as *Malevolence* in shape... just with no guns. The mounts were there, but the turrets were gone.

"Indeed." Kronaak nodded. "She is empty right now, no weapons or other internal systems beyond powerplant and engines. We believe that could be remedied within three months of work."

"Less, if I were in charge." Eemon said. "I doubt you know this, but I was in the logistics corps of my father's army before this war. I am no great strategist or visionary tactician, but I know a thing or two about supply and transportation."

"You would need to divert resources from other building programs." Mar Tuuk said. "I am not sure that is wise."

"*Malevolence* was a product of flawed naval strategy." spoke Admiral Hithlu. "There will be no decisive battle in this war, attrition is how it will be won. We need cheap ships we can replace, not priceless star dreadnoughts."

No decisive battle? Grievous thought. That was news to him. He'd need to speak to Hithlu more. This Umbaran was standing out today. Perhaps he'd always been like this, and Grievous had never noticed...

"*Malevolence* was a raider, not a tool for the illusory decisive battle." Eemon replied. "Her speed was her chief weapon, which we believe was underutilized. A fast, hard-hitting ship capable of supporting herself could wreak untold havoc behind Republic lines. Unlike the early days of the war, the Republic is now spread thinly across the Outer Rim. Our success at Coruscant shows how vulnerable the Core and Colonies really are."

"Need I remind you that *Malevolence*'s fighter screen failed against a single bomber squadron?" asked Grievous.

"Vulture droids are cannon fodder. Tri-fighters would be the only option for *Cataclysm*'s fighter screen." Kronaak stated.

"Expensive." noted Mar Tuuk.

"Necessary." Eemon corrected. "Complete this ship with some modifications, give her top-of-the-line equipment, and put a competent commander in charge, and you would have a very dangerous raider."

"And what modifications would those be?" Grievous asked.

"Double the fighter compliment, add a bomber wing or two, use an organic officer staff." said Kronaak.

"The expenses continue to grow." Mar Tuuk gave the two new admirals an unamused look.

"By a factor of eighteen percent." added Alzar Khwaramenes.

"If we keep placing profit above military advantage, this war will end soon, and not in our favor." Eemon said. Hithlu nodded, and Grievous found himself nodding too.

"Very well. Rear Admiral Eemon, complete this ship as you see fit. Leave the funding to me. We need to remove pressure from our Outer Rim holdings, whatever the cost." Grievous commanded. "Now, there is something else you all should know. I have already informed our corporate sponsors, and I intend to inform this *Congress* tomorrow. Count Dooku is dead, and has been dead since Coruscant. He was killed by Anakin Skywalker moments before my droids killed him in turn."

There was silence from the collected officers. Only the occasional buzz of static from the holograms interrupted it. There was shock and worry, but some relief too, from a certain admiral.

"I always thought he was leading us to defeat." Hithlu was the first to speak again. "Who leads us now?"

"I do." said Grievous.

"Good." The Umbaran smiled darkly. The other officers didn't look nearly as pleased.

"Keep this to yourselves until my address tomorrow. Send in your full reports, we will reconvene when I have decided our next move. Until then, your orders are to hold the line... Except you, Vice Admiral Cartroll, pull back to Sluis Van and repair your ships. You all are also to begin searching for promising commanders in your ranks. I grow tired of incompetence, and now I no longer have to tolerate it." With nothing more to say, Grievous shut the projector off.

Author's note: I knew I forgot to do something yesterday. My apologies. In this chapter, we meet some notable tertiary characters in the form of Grievous's best officers. Don't worry about remembering their names, I'm going to introduce their full names and race whenever they show up. Some will show up more than others.

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